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GENEVA PASS HEALTH ATTACHE
DEPARTMENT PASS USAID FOR GH/RCS/EE/ROSENBERG
CDC ATLANTA PASS SEPRL FOR DAVID SUAREZ

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TAGS: TBIO KFLU KSTH KPAO SENV RS
SUBJECT: RUSSIAN LAB MOVES AHEAD TO BECOME REGIONAL AND WHO FLU CENTER

REFS: A. 06 Moscow 12876 (G8 Infectious Diseases)
¶B. Moscow 1318 (Russian AI Preparedness)
¶C. 06 Moscow 10955 (Human AI Vaccine)

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Russia pledged to transform the Vector State Research Center of Virology and Biotechnology near Novosibirsk into a regional influenza center and ultimately a WHO Collaborating Center for avian influenza as part of its 2006 G8 Presidential focus on infectious diseases. Although Vector has formally applied to become a WHO reference laboratory and collaborating center and has hosted a WHO assessment team, the process could take as long as two years to complete. Vector has been actively developing its diagnostic and surveillance capacity in the meantime, and training flu specialists from the CIS and Central Asia. The question of how willingly Vector will share avian influenza samples with institutes outside Russia is still unresolved. END SUMMARY.

WHO Begins Assessing Vector as an AI Center

¶2. (SBU) During the Soviet era, Vector was part of Biopreparat, which produced biological compounds for both civilian and military applications. Although Russia has consistently denied that the

Soviet Union had an offensive biological weapons program, it is widely believed that Vector was specifically established in the 1970s to develop viral agents for military uses. In 2004, jurisdiction over Vector was transferred to the Health and Social Development Ministry, and it is now a leading virology and biotech research center. Vector was involved in virus isolation and characterization and AI surveillance during a 2005 AI outbreak which occurred in the Novosibirsk region (a crossroads for migratory birds).

¶3. (SBU) As pledged during its 2006 G8 Presidency (Ref A), Russia is spending $45 million to establish Vector as a regional collaborating center for Avian Influenza and to equip a network of 26 other labs. Vector falls under the jurisdiction of Gennadiy Onishchenko, Russia's Chief Medical Officer and the head of the Federal Service for the Protection of Consumer Rights and Human Well-Being (Rospotrebnadzor). Media savvy and probably Russia's most vocal and influential public health figure, Onishchenko effectively used Russia's G8 presidency to garner additional funding for Vector to conduct research on both HIV/AIDS and AI (Ref A).

¶4. (SBU) Vector submitted an application to the WHO to become a collaborating center for avian influenza in 2006, and a WHO assessment team visited the institute in April 2007. The WHO team found that Vector had a strong background in AI virus isolation and research, but no expertise in handling human cases of AI or conducting human influenza surveillance. There is currently no laboratory for human influenza at Vector, and Vector is in the process of remodeling one of its Biosafety Level Three facilities to turn it into the AI lab. The WHO team concluded that Vector could eventually become a WHO collaborating center for AI research, but that this process could take as long as two years. Another WHO inspection team will visit Vector within that period to make a final

designation.

Vector Takes Regional Lead on AI Conferences and Training

¶5. (SBU) Vector has begun a robust program to enhance the AI skills of its own experts, and to train other specialists from CIS countries and Central Asia. Four leading Russian influenza experts visited the WHO collaborating Center at CDC Atlanta in January 2007, and six flu scientists will visit the WHO Collaborating Center in London this month. Vector has conducted training sessions for specialists from Mongolia and Kazakhstan, and some 157 experts from Russian regional offices of Rospotrebnadzor will be trained at Vector in the coming months. Vector's training programs have covered the issues of AI biosafety precautions and diagnostic practices.

¶6. (SBU) Rospotrebnadzor and Vector have also been working to establish formal cooperative agreements on AI with other CIS countries. In addition to framework bilateral agreements on AI cooperation between Rospotrebnadzor and several of the CIS countries' health ministries, Vector itself has recently inked collaboration agreements with influenza institutes in Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan on material and information exchange, joint expeditions and field epidemiology work, and joint training. Rospotrebnadzor and Vector are also working to sign similar agreements with flu centers in the other CIS countries.

¶7. (SBU) Vector hosted a two-day Conference on Joint AI Prevention for senior health officials from CIS countries in November 2006. All of the CIS countries except Georgia attended and adopted a joint action plan on pandemic preparedness for 2006-2009. The delegates endorsed establishing Vector as a WHO influenza collaborating center, noting that it would increase efficiency and reduce the cost of regional anti-epidemic activities. Vector hosted a second conference in May 2007 for working-level heads of CIS diagnostic labs which over 50 experts attended.

Full Sample Sharing Still a Touchy Question

¶8. (SBU) Sharing of flu virus samples with the outside world remains a thorny issue for Vector in particular and for Russia in general. While Russia accepts samples from abroad and even developed a human AI vaccine at the Research Institute of Influenza (RII) in St. Petersburg using samples from the WHO Collaborating Center in Great Britain (Ref C), it is less eager to share samples from Russia outside its borders. For routine human influenza cases, Russia has historically exchanged information and provided virus samples to the CDC and other WHO Collaborating Centers. For AI samples, Vector recently provided the CDC with some DNA material and sera from humans who had contact with sick birds during the 2005 AI outbreak in the Novosibirsk region. Vector is also now considering whether to share virus isolates with St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, but this would require special government permission. In 2006, Russia dropped its legal objections to sharing AI samples, but we are not aware of any cases in which AI samples have actually been shared outside of Russia since then. Health

officials had maintained from 2004-2006 that Russian law absolutely prohibited the sharing of AI samples, because they were included in a list of dangerous pathogens that cannot be exported.

Vector's Relations With Other Russian Institutes

¶9. (SBU) The spending of lavish amounts of money (by Russian standards) on Vector's AI capacity has created tensions with the Research Institute of Influenza (RII) in St. Petersburg, one of Russia's other two existing WHO national influenza centers. RII Director Oleg Kiselyov was offended and took umbrage with Onishchenko's initial desire to embrace all influenza research at Vector, not just AI, which would have clearly usurped the St. Petersburg Institute's traditional role as Russia's leading human influenza center. This has spoiled somewhat the relationship between the two institutes.

¶10. (SBU) Vector also has a spotty reputation for cooperating with Russia's premier veterinary diagnostic and testing lab, the Federal Center for Animal Health (ARRIAH) in Vladimir. Although ARRIAH is supposed to take the lead role in AI outbreaks among birds, Vector has in some cases conducted preliminary testing of specimens from birds and then not shared those samples with ARRIAH.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: There is no doubt that Chief Medical Officer Onishchenko has the political backing and sufficient funding to see the WHO collaborating project through over the next two years at Vector. However, Vector, Rospotrebnadzor, and the Health and Social Development Ministry, will ultimately have to overcome the secretive culture at Vector and the historical reluctance to share virus samples with the outside world.

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